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SUBJECT: POLICE CHIEF BENKO CRITICAL OF INTERIOR MINISTER RONCEVIC'S LATEST ACTIONS

Classified By: Political Officer Chris Zimmer for reason 1.4 (b) & (d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: In a July 25 courtesy call with incoming Poloff, Director of Police Marijan Benko expressed deep frustration with his boss, Interior Minister Roncevic, over moves that weaken Benko's position within the Ministry. Benko said he was irritated by Roncevic's requirement for him to reapply as Director of Police and Roncevic's replacement of the Zagreb Chief of Police with a personal friend. Benko believes he will be reappointed but that the appointment will likely remain unofficial for months because he expects delays due to challenges from other candidates. Benko also said that Roncevic is linked to organized crime and is currently under investigation by the anticorruption and organized crime office of the state prosecutor. END SUMMARY

Benko Reapplying to Keep His Current Job

¶12. (C) Incoming Poloff called on Croatian Police Director Marijan Benko at his office in the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) on July 25, 2008. After introductions, Benko immediately began describing his problems with the Interior Minister Berislav Roncevic, detailing the Minister's actions that Benko views as undermining his authority and the effectiveness of the police since Roncevic's move from Ministry of Defense to MOI in January 2008.

¶13. (C) Benko confirmed media reports that Roncevic is re-advertising Benko's position and is requiring that the director reapply for his politically appointed position. Benko, who worked as a career police officer, would have to undergo a physical and mental health exam, in a competitive selection process. He stated that he will reapply and will fight to retain his position, but that if he loses the selection process he will likely return to the private sector.

¶14. (C) Benko expects that associates of Roncevic will apply for his position but that Roncevic will likely reappoint him so as not to risk potential political fallout or anger from the Police Union, whom Benko claims is strongly against this reapplication process. Benko also said that he does not think Prime Minister Sanader would allow Benko to be replaced, but he expressed concern that Sanader may be unaware of the extent to which Roncevic was seeking to control the police. Benko believes, however, that his reappointment will take a great deal of time to complete because he thinks that candidates allied to Roncevic will appeal the appointment, thus initiating a long process that

could delay his official appointment for months, further weakening his authority over the police force.

¶ 15. (C) Benko complained that he has already lost a great deal of authority since Roncevic, without consulting Benko, fired Zagreb Chief of Police Marijan Tamurad and replaced him with a personal friend, Ivica Tolusic, in June 2008. Tolusic now reports directly to Roncevic, according to Benko, bypassing the official chain of command. Benko's authority has effectively been reduced to overseeing less than half of police operations, he said, because Zagreb police handle sixty percent of all cases in Croatia.

¶ 16. (C) Benko also complained that Roncevic was not releasing all the funds allocated in the budget for police operations. He further asserted that the Minister of Science, Education and Sports, Dragan Primorac is very close to Roncevic and that they were working together to move the Forensic Center and DNA lab, currently part of MOI, to the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. (NOTE: Primorac is a forensic scientist with extensive experience, including in the U.S. END NOTE.)

Allegations of Corruption

¶ 17. (C) Benko went on to claim that Roncevic has ties to organized crime groups in Eastern Slavonia, although he did not offer any evidence to support his allegations. He claims that Roncevic is placing allies within the police force in part to acquire knowledge of police activities that are of interest to organized crime groups. Benko said that he knows

Roncevic is under investigation by USKOK, the Office of Suppression of Corruption and Organized Crime in the State Prosecutor's office, but that he does not know any details of the investigation. (NOTE: In a separate meeting, Dinko Cvitan, head of USKOK, confirmed to Poloff that Roncevic is currently under investigation but had not yet been called for questioning. The press has speculated that Roncevic is being investigated for a military truck procurement that took place while he was Minister of Defense. END NOTE.)

Grateful for Ties with the Embassy

¶ 17. (U) Benko reaffirmed the close relationship his office has with the Embassy and thanked the Embassy for assistance provided through the ICITAP program, including a study trip to the United States scheduled for September in which Benko will participate that examines the relationships between prosecutors and police.

Comment

¶ 18. (C) Benko is a close contact for the Embassy and the frank discussion of his situation with a new officer indicates that he is frustrated and seeking out allies in his fight with Roncevic. Such a fight, especially if it plays out in the media, would be damaging for the MOI. If the allegations against Roncevic are also made public this would be a blow to the government's efforts to demonstrate both domestically and internationally, particularly to the EU, that it is taking strong action against corruption.

Bradtko